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CHRIST *and* WOMEN

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Christ and Women

THE loneliest thing in all the world is a woman's heart.

Human hearts are all, it is true, doomed through life to a certain amount of loneliness. Separated from the rest of the world by a thin but impenetrable wall of flesh, their deepest emotions, their moments of supreme exultation and crushing grief cannot really be shared by anyone. We humans may express fluently enough our surface feelings, those momentary enthusiasms or joys; the things that are of deepest concern remain for the most part locked forever unuttered in our secret hearts. Great love, great sorrow, great joy leave us inarticulate, silent.

If this be true of all mankind, as it surely is, it is particularly true of women. There have been great men who caught the essence of their loves or sorrows between their two hands and imprisoned it forever in a poem for the whole world to see. Dramatists have with rough fingers stripped their hearts naked and made them play their parts upon the stage. Musicians have turned inarticulate cries of pain and sorrow into the terrifying harmonies of a great symphony. Men have even, at rare times, dragged out their secret selves to walk through the pages of a diary.

But for every hundred men who have given the world the secrets of their hearts

in drama, poetry, novel, or music there has scarcely been one woman who did so. Men have tried in literature to tell the secret emotions of women's hearts (as if for a moment they really could divine them); but when one reads these studies of women by men, one wonders if the most brilliant of them has touched ever so lightly even the surface of woman's soul.

At any rate, self-revelation by a woman is rare in literature and rare in life. Her heart is an unentered sanctuary, a sealed casket, a secret garden guarded from all intrusion. Whether from shyness or from fear, woman has kept to herself the feelings that concern her most deeply. Her moments of truest emotional significance she keeps hidden in her locked heart. She shares them with no one.

Who Knows Her Heart?

Who but the girl herself knows how she feels as the day of her wedding draws near and she faces the realization that soon she will place her whole happiness in the keeping of one who, for all the fact that he is dear to her, is still almost a stranger? No nun, as far as I have read or heard, has ever told the emotions that filled her heart when on her vow day she went to meet her invisible Bridegroom.

Men have written beautifully of motherhood and given us the glorious Madonnas; but what mother has really been able to share with a curious world the glory,

the deep peace, the sense of blessed accomplishment, the flood of maternal love that suddenly overflowed as her first-born child was laid against her breast? Priests have attempted, badly in most cases, to describe the emotions that exalted them on the day of their first mass; but the little mother kneeling there in the first pew and looking up with joyous astonishment as her son brings her God down upon the altar is mutely inarticulate. And though the world is full of Pietàs, statues of the Mother holding her dead Son in her arms, not the mother of Christ nor the bereaved mother of any first-born has told us the anguish of her heart at that terrible moment of loss.

In its sharpest joy and sorrow, in its supreme happiness and grief, the heart of a woman is alone and lonely. Certainly no man understands it—least of all, perhaps, the man who is surest that he does.

No One Who Understands

Yet loneliness is not only a sad, it is a perilous thing. Pent-up emotions are explosive; sometimes they are poisonous. God gave us our instinct for human companionship and our possibilities of social intercourse and confidence just because we all, men and women alike, need someone to share our emotional life and help us bear burdens too heavy for us to bear alone.

Yet with women this outlet is almost always extremely limited. Man, her natural companion, is, by the very force of his nature, preoccupied, intent on the ruthless fight

and hunt that is life. He must give so much of his physical and mental energy to the crude problems of food and clothes and shelter. Even in the most civilized man there is something of the warrior and hunter going forth at dawn to beat back the enemies that close in about his home and to bring back at the day's end the food and skins he has gathered.

This is a desperately tiring and engrossing business, and it kills, often enough, the finer responses of his emotions and the keener sympathies and sensibilities of his soul. Men are frequently so busy with the fight for their own existence and the existence of their dependents that women find them, even the men who tenderly love them, absorbed, abstracted, matter-of-fact, out of touch with the thought and emotions that fill a woman's life. The most devoted husband, the most affectionate son, the most loyal brother is still the hunter and fighter of the family; and hunting and fighting, even in their very civilized forms, do not fit a man to be consistently gentle, understanding, or sympathetic where a woman's emotions are concerned.

Besides, about a woman's heart God has placed as a protective armor her natural modesty and reticence. She draws back instinctively from giving her real confidences. Men will, she feels, be bored by them. Some men will be cruel enough to take advantage of them. Her sad experience has made her wonder just how far she is safe in trusting not merely the casual stranger but even the close but thus far untested friend.

Can Any Man Satisfy?

"Is there anywhere in the world," women have asked from the depths of their lonely hearts, "anyone who will give us the sympathy, understanding, and response that we crave?"

That question has been at the back of all the yearning for romance that fills a woman's life, a yearning that does not die from the dawn of girlhood to the golden glow of far maturity. Its answer would be, of course, the perfect man, who could receive confidences without abusing them, understand scarcely understood hearts without troubling them, give affection without presumption, strength tempered with gentleness, and a sympathy that could be accepted with safety.

The unceasing search of a woman's lonely heart is for the ideal man.

Is there such a man? For a long period in the history of the world there was not. Now, thank God, there is—the man to whom women turn trustingly, who understands them better than they understand themselves, who fulfills in every detail the ideal which women carry in their hearts, who is strong but kind, heroic but gentle, never impatient, never abstracted or self-centered, who knows women so thoroughly that they hardly need to tell Him their secrets, and who unfailingly solves the problems that they bring to Him —Jesus Christ.

All Through His Life

Writers have sometimes stated that women had little place in the life of Christ. This is a

strange, unintelligible statement utterly without foundation. Once, the writers argue, when He sat by a well and talked with a Samaritan woman, the Apostles were surprised. The writers forget that the disciples would have been equally surprised had they found Him talking with a Samaritan man. Samaritans were the hated enemies of the Jews, and with them Jews had no sort of voluntary communication. Certainly the Apostles who had accompanied Him so intimately could hardly have been surprised that He showed this needy woman interest and sympathy. They had never seen Him show any woman anything else. Later on they were to hear Him speak sternly to a pagan woman; but this was to make the faith of an outcast woman shame unbelieving Jewish men.

Women walk through the pages of Christ's life with calm frequency. They are often close to Him, in His company, playing dramatic roles in His life's story. They are consistently the recipients of His kindness and His gracious favors. To talk or write as if Christ ignored or avoided or had little dealing with women is simply to leave out or pass over whole sections of the Gospel story. It is utterly to misunderstand Christ.

For women were His loyal followers, His devoted friends, who saw in Him their tactful advocate and courageous protector. Christ's attitude toward women is just one of the beautiful and consoling things in His character. We falsify our picture of Christ

by talking or writing as if He shunned or positively disliked women.

A World Cruel to Women

What makes His attitude the more notable is its contrast with the attitude toward women that prevailed when He came into the world. The world had been a sad place for women. Pagan slave markets were full of them, and their price was graded to their physical charm or the breadth of their backs for carrying burdens. They got their value from their ability to please the eye or serve the whim of man, the master. Rome and Greece talked much about their respect for good women, but they saw to it that the life of a good woman was almost that of a slave. Woman was barred the larger life of her times unless, as was the case especially in the golden age of Greece, she bought liberty at the price of shame. Courtesans made great places for themselves in public life; good women were almost prisoners in their homes.

The lot of a Jewish woman was, of course, immeasurably higher; but even she was the servant, the inferior, whose fate was so completely in the hands of her master that custom had come to permit a husband to divorce her for the crime of an unsatisfactory breakfast. A lower place in the temple, an inferior seat at table, the task of waiting hand and foot even on her own sons, was regarded as her unquestioned lot.

If she fell by some sad fate a victim to man's pursuing instincts and lost the inno-

cence with which she might purchase dull respectability, there was not the slightest chance of her rising from the mud. Pagan and Jew alike kept the fallen woman in the gutter. For her there was neither hope nor opportunity for repentance. Men made sin easy for her, but they were unforgiving once she had gratified their cruel passion.

Christ Comes to Womankind

Into this world so hard and merciless to women walked Jesus, with pity in His eyes for all womankind. Was it strange, when we come to think of it, that women should mean so much to Him? There was only one person in the world to whom He, the God-Man, could properly be said to owe anything. That was the woman Mary, His mother. No human father had given Him what fathers give to the rest of mankind. His whole body was given Him by His mother. We may be sure that His features were hers; if her hair curled back from her forehead, so, in all probability, did His; even His eyes took their color from hers. She was His only human parent, and whatever resemblance He bore to any human being was the resemblance He bore to Mary.

During the formative years when He advanced in age, wisdom, and grace, it was intimacy with a woman which shaped His human characteristics. Her voice was the first He heard, and from it He caught, as children always do, her little tricks of speech. She taught Him all the dear things that only a mother can teach a son and that put

upon a boy the seal of a mother's personality. By her side He experienced sorrow, exile, joy, peace, every human emotion. Naturally His human heart, feeling the burden of His debt to Mary, must have been tender to the whole race of women.

His Debt to a Woman

If Jesus may be said to owe anything to anyone, then surely He owes all to a woman. She paid dearly for the privilege of being His mother. Because she accepted that tremendous responsibility, she experienced the stable and exile in a foreign land. She gave Him through the years of childhood the patient care with which a mother wraps round her little one. She trained the growing boy, tasted the poverty that He chose for His lot, the long, tedious separation of His public life, the agony on Calvary. No woman but can lift her head in proud joy when she remembers that one of her sex gave to the God-Man all that humanly went into the moulding of His man's nature.

And Jesus, who repaid all debts a hundredfold, seems to have repaid His debt to Mary in the kindness and gentleness He showed to all her sisters, the women of the human race.

Perhaps, in addition, Christ brought to earth something of that yearning, almost motherly, with which God regarded His chosen people. "Can a woman forget her infant, so as not to have pity on the son of her womb? And if she should forget, yet will not I forget thee" (Is. 19:15). Cer-

tainly there was an exquisite tenderness in the tears which He shed over Jerusalem as He compared Himself to the mother hen longing to gather her chickens under her wing, and there is a gentleness in His parables of the lost sheep, the prodigal son, and the good Samaritan.

The Son of Mary never forgot that the first and great influence in His life was the influence of His mother, and He brought to every woman that tenderness and gentleness which every good son of every good mother feels toward womankind. His treatment of them is part payment of His debt to His mother.

Women Follow Him

The Gospel story emphasizes, naturally enough, the work of the Apostles. They were Christ's intimates, His partners in His Father's business, the pupils in His school, the officers He was training for the future battle. Yet back of the Apostles the Gospel gives us glimpses of the group of women who patiently, almost thanklessly, followed them, ministering to their needs, caring for their wants, acting as servants of the apostolic college. The other Marys, the mother of James and John, the relatives of Our Lady, the Blessed Mother herself, were among this patient group which mended the garments, washed the linen, prepared the meals, and served the wants of Christ and His followers.

Then, when the officers in Christ's army fled before the very first attack made in

Gethsemane, this brave little group of women continued to follow Christ. They traced His bloody footsteps to the top of Calvary and braved Jewish hatred and Roman heartlessness to be near Him when He died.

A Refuge and a Home

One spot seems to have been especially dear to Jesus. It was a little house in Bethany where Lazarus lived with his two sisters, Martha and Mary. When the suspicion, trickery, and groundless dislike that hemmed Him round pressed too painfully against His sacred heart, Christ made the journey from Jerusalem to Bethany to find in that little house the love and understanding denied Him in the courts of the Temple. There, in the comfortable living room, was kept His special chair; and when Mary, standing in the doorway, saw His tall figure down the road, she ran to meet Him, while Martha, over the fire, grew hot and flurried for fear that the dish she was preparing might not be quite perfect and the table not set as befitted their beloved guest.

Then He sat down exhausted and heartsore, and about Himself felt the warming, refreshing love and tenderness of these sisters, one of whom was content to sit at His feet, just looking at Him and treasuring His slightest word, while the other wearied herself in her eagerness to make His stay comfortable and happy. Though the priests in the Temple plotted His death, two young women, by their love and labor, made His

life a little more endurable and gave Him, in the midst of the battle raging about Him, a haven of quiet peace and gracious womanly hospitality.

Martha and Mary have stood in the minds of mankind as the types of all the women in this world who have found happiness either in laboring for Jesus or in sitting peacefully, safely, quite contentedly at His feet. He was the perfect man, and in His company they were at peace.

Tactful Miracles

Whenever women were in need, Christ gave His miracles freely, and often, with such beautiful tact, before the women asked for them.

A poor little bride sat at her wedding feast. This was the great event of her life. For years she had looked forward to the moment she would preside happily, proudly, at her bridal table; for long years she would live in its glow, remembering, as she dreamed over her housework, that once she sat in the midst of guests, the admired, envied, sweetly condescending hostess.

Yet above her joyous feast, though she did not know it, hung a threatening cloud. The wine, on which depended so much of the gayety of the feast, was running low. The steward stood debating whether or not he had better whisper the distressing news to the little bride. When the wine failed, the guests would go away, outwardly sympathizing with the bride in her distress, inwardly

despising the poor girl whose wedding feast would be remembered because she had been too poor to provide sufficient wine.

But even as the steward debated breaking the news, a woman, Mary, had pleaded the cause of the bride. The steward looked up to see servants pouring fresh wine into the goblets. He tasted it. Ah, it was better than the other. The feast was saved. We are not sure that the bride ever guessed how near she had come to public humiliation. We only know that, at the request of His mother and to save a young woman pain, Jesus advanced the time of His first public miracle. This first of the Savior's miracles was worked for a woman because a woman asked it.

A widow walked out from her little village behind the dead body of her only son. Jesus was entering the town bound on important business. But as the widow passed, He paused and followed her with His eyes. More than likely the widow did not know Jesus or His miraculous power. Certainly she did not ask a miracle. Tear-blinded, she plodded on after the body of her son. But Jesus, not waiting for her to ask, took her son by the hand, lifted him to his feet, and gave him back alive and well to his mother.

Through the crowd one day crept a woman tortured by a disease that carried with it an ancient mark of shame. She did not want to face Christ, tell Him the nature of her disease where everyone could hear her, and then, in the presence of the people, ask for a

miracle. Would He, she wondered, though she hardly doubted it, be gracious enough to heal her without a formal request that meant embarrassment and distress of mind? She reached Him in the midst of the crowd, touched the hem of His garment, and stood erect, healed, happy, without even a word from Christ that He knew what she desired. Only when she stood with lifted head did He turn, look approvingly on her faith, and confirm the miracle He had wrought with such delicacy.

So women everywhere, from the little girl lying dead in her father's house to the mother-in-law of St. Peter, found Him pitiful, gentle, considerate, and unfailingly tactful.

Even Toward Sinners

Perhaps the severest test of a man's attitude toward womankind is found in his conduct toward sinful women. A sinful woman, by the common custom of mankind, seems to have been placed outside the bounds of human pity. She is treated as if hardly human. Even good men have been quick to condemn her, slow to forgive, unwilling to forget. Evil men, of course, are eager to hold her captive on their own filthy level. Good men are often afraid that a short step or even a slight gesture of pity toward her hand stretched out appealingly may drag them downward to the bog in which she struggles.

For just this reason we learn best the tenderness in the heart of Christ for woman-

kind by watching Him in the presence of sinful women. No woman ever sank so low as to be beyond the range of His pitying eyes and of His hand reached out to save her.

The woman near the well at Samaria with whom He paused to talk was an adulteress and one He knew to be an adulteress. Yet she was as much in need of the waters of eternal life as if she were a virgin. She was a lost sheep, He the good shepherd, and that was all that mattered.

The Pharisees evidently were aware of this pity in His heart for unfortunate women, because they attempted to use it as a trap to turn the people against Him. The law of Moses commanded that a woman taken in adultery be stoned to death. So, with the cruel cunning of men who hated both Christ and the unfortunate woman, they dragged before Him an adulteress. In their hearts they wondered if Christ would not set aside the law of Moses rather than condemn this quivering, beaten woman to be crushed under the stones they carried. No matter which way He answered, they had Him. If He freed her, He would defy the law and the people might stone Him. If He bade them stone her, all His fine talk of pity and forgiveness of sins, all His pretended sympathy for women, would be blown away in the gale of His command.

"Judge her!" they cried, and they were sure that they had caught Him between the law and His pity for womankind.

We know quite well the way He slipped

through their net and sent these men away trembling and afraid as He wrote in the sand the sins, not of the woman, but of the men, beginning from the eldest. What we sometimes forget is that His pity was so astonishing to a generation pitiless to women that some of the early Christians did not want to believe this incident and omitted it entirely from their manuscript copies of the Gospels. They preferred to think that Christ would not give an adulteress a second chance. But no one can forget the fact that for almost the first time in history a man was strong enough and gentle enough to stoop down, lift a sinful woman from the gutter, set her upon her feet, and say, "Neither do I condemn thee. Go and sin no more."

From that moment hope and courage dawned in the hearts of sinful women, and even in the depths they looked up into the calm eyes that gazed pityingly and forgivingly upon them.

He Risks Much for Magdalen

Rather than throw back into her despair a sinful woman who sought Him, Jesus risked the possible belief of a whole group of men in His claims to be the Messias. They sat down to dinner, He and the Pharisees, in the house of one of their chiefs. Suddenly the door was flung open and in the archway stood a woman of wondrous beauty. The Pharisees drew back in artificial horror. Mary of Magdala, a notorious harlot, whose name was famous throughout Judea! Her very presence was a stain on the house of any man.

But the woman in the doorway was not looking at the Pharisees, who held their cloaks back from contact with her. Her eyes were fixed on Christ, Christ who, as He had passed her in the streets, looked with sorrowing, pitying eyes upon her. Hesitantly she moved forward. Would He draw back from her as the rest did? In her hand was a box of precious ointment, the gift her woman's heart had bought just for Him. She paused near Him, broke open the alabaster box, and then—for she saw that He did not draw away from her as if she were a repulsive thing—fell at His feet, washed them in the great flood of her tears and wiped them with her luxuriant hair.

The Pharisees now transferred their disgusted look from Mary to Jesus. She was a harlot, and yet this man was letting her perfume His head and wash His feet. There He sat in the midst of them while an impure woman touched Him. Whatever faith they might have had in Him tottered to a fall. And though they shuddered piously, in their hearts they were glad. This proved once and for all that He was not the Messias. For, they argued shrewdly, either He knew who this woman was or He did not. If He knew and still let her touch Him, then He was an evil man, for a good man shrank in horror when a woman like this so much as passed him in the streets. If He did not know who she was, then He was no prophet, and a notorious woman had completely deceived Him.

Jesus, however, preferred the love of this

repentant woman to the possible faith of the proud Pharisees, and at the touch of His pitying eyes Magdalen the sinner became Magdalen the saint.

From that day the greatest sinner in the world has not feared to fling herself before the Man who has contributed nothing to her shame but everything to her regeneration. Jesus knew that when women stray they have most frequently been misled by their own hot, misunderstood hearts. They have looked for love and found lust, searched for happiness and been caught by its gaudy substitute, given confidence and found betrayal. He knew, too, how the same souls that are capable of plumbing the depths are often capable, once they turn to Him, of gaining the heights. We may almost think of Magdalen as rising from her knees to walk straight up to the cross on Calvary.

To Women Through Their Children

The Apostles were guilty of one act of gross, though well-intended, discourtesy for which history may well be grateful. If they had not attempted to keep the children away from Jesus one evening, we might never have heard from Him the beautiful words "Suffer little children to come unto me."

Important as those words are to children and as a clue to the character of Christ, they have perhaps an even stronger, more poignant significance for women. They go straight to the heart of every woman who has ever felt the love of children. They

make her love Christ because He was so tender to little ones.

If Christ had not been humanly attractive, the children would not have pressed about Him insistently. Children have a sense of values that makes them recognize and love only true worth. If Christ had not been, for all His strength, singularly tender and gentle, He would not have issued that unforgettable command to the Apostles who held the little children away from Him.

So that phrase reaches the hearts of all good women through their children, telling them how attractive He must have been and how considerate of the babies. It has echoed in the hearts of all mothers as it echoed again and again in the hearts of those mothers whose children ran at that command to throw themselves into His arms.

Here was an intensely busy man whose days were spent traveling, preaching, working miracles, and whose nights were filled with prayer, long personal interviews, perilous journeys over the sea. At the close of the day, with just a few moments for rest, He sank down on the shore of the lake utterly to relax. But not far away the group of little children had been waiting for this moment, and with them was a cluster of mothers carrying their babies. Should they approach this busy, tired, apparently exhausted man? Would He, like so many men in moments of weariness, be brusque and impatient? The children made the first tentative approach, but were held back by the officious disciples.

The mothers half agreed—a tired man had little patience with children and their thoughtless insistencies. They turned to walk away, their disappointed children clinging to their skirts. Then the voice of Christ rang out welcomingly; the children rushed joyously past the humbled disciples, and the mothers looked on the picture that no mother has ever regarded unmoved—the tired yet strong Jesus holding little children against His heart.

That scene has meant much more to women than to children. For women know that when a man worn out with labor, harassed by the attacks of enemies, and shadowed by approaching death still has time to bless their children, hold them in his arms, and smile approvingly at their mothers, he has the strength and tenderness, the power and the sympathy they are seeking for themselves.

Tenderness in Pain

Pain has a way of making us extraordinarily selfish. Injustice drives us back into ourselves, leaving us distrustful, self-centered, aloof. Few men under the influence of pain have any thought except for themselves, certainly little for the sufferings of others. And when a man feels that the world he has tried to benefit is doing him to death, he shrinks from all mankind as from his personal enemies.

Up the long grade of Calvary Jesus staggered under His cross. Pain had tightened every nerve into a quivering, agonizing knot.

The cross rubbed bitingly into the wounds of the scourges; and when He faltered, the blows of a knotted rope spurred Him onward. Among all that throng there was no one to cry for His release or to rebuke the curses and mockery that greeted the Man who had done nothing but love them and labor for them. Torturing pain and unspeakable injustice were His companions on that steep climb to Calvary.

But as He rounded a turn in the via crucis, a new sound struck His ears—women's sobs and cries of heartfelt pity. He raised His eyes from the rough road. A group of women stood against the white wall of a house weeping out their hearts for one who had been so good to womankind. Toward Him as He passed they held out distressed, fluttering hands.

Human instinct, at a moment like that, is to seize the proffered sympathy and with it bathe one's own wounds. But Jesus forgot His sufferings, His agony of physical pain and bitter injustice, and turned His pity upon those women, whose terrible fate was bound up with the siege and doom He foresaw threatening Jerusalem. Hunger, disease, and inhuman crimes would, He knew, torture women and children as Roman soldiers stormed the city's walls. So, with that pity which made Him think always of others and never of Himself, He forgot His own plight and spoke out of a pain-twisted mouth to the weeping women: "Weep not for me but for yourselves and your children."

Then from the crowd a woman bravely rushed forward. In a splendid unpremeditated gesture of sympathy, she snatched the veil from her head and with it wiped His face. Tradition has loved to think that He smiled up gratefully at Veronica, as tradition has insisted that His reward to her far outshadowed her generosity to Him—and Veronica fell back into the crowd, pushed by the rough hands of the soldiers, holding to her lips the veil that bore the miraculous impress of His beloved face.

Women Around the Cross

Then from the vantage point of the cross He looked over the world to see who really loved Him. Among all those faces that He saw snarling up at Him and spitting upon Him the venom of their hatred, His gaze rested on the young face of St. John, the brave, tearless face of His mother, the sorrowing faces of the holy women and, pressed against the foot of His cross, the agonized face of Magdalen who had been the sinner. One man, and the rest faithful women, daring the fury of a mob to be near Him as He died.

No wonder that, when Easter dawned, immemorial legend tells us He first appeared to a woman, His mother, and the Gospels tell us that He showed Himself to the holy women who had been with Him on Calvary and to Magdalen weeping near His tomb. Women had shared His ignominy; He made them the first to share His glory.

This, then, is the attitude toward women of the historic Christ. There have been heroes who won the love and loyalty of women. But even great heroes have often been cruel to the women who loved them, as Napoleon was to Josephine or Caesar to the women whose loves dotted his career. There have been pure knights like Galahad and brave knights like Bayard, but women meant almost nothing to them. Philosophers sometimes talked rather beautifully of women, but they went home to quarrel furiously with their wives or they left their lofty lectures to soil women with impure lusts. Women have envied Clare the sympathy and comradeship of Francis of Assisi as they envied Scholastica her brother Benedict and Queen Blanche her son St. Louis.

But before the coming of Jesus Christ, no man ever meant to womankind what He did. No man save the God-Man ever was at once so heroic and so tender. No man ever looked upon women with such gentle eyes, yet lifted her with such strong, pure hands. No man ever gave more to women and asked less from them.

Fortunately for womankind the historic Christ lives on in His Church, and His attitude toward women remains unchanged. We are inclined to be almost astonished at the wonderful tenderness and affection He has shown to the women saints, almost as though He found in their devotion a love that made

up, at least in part, for the love denied Him by a selfish world.

The mystic espousals in which Christ placed on the finger of St. Catherine His wedding ring was a symbol of the union that has joined Him to the souls of all religious women from the days of Rome's first consecrated virgins to the days of the last young novice pronouncing her vows. The stigmata that He pressed upon the hands and hearts of women saints are just the continued sharing of His Passion with women as He first shared it with the Mater Dolorosa and the women who stood near the cross.

So often in history He has entrusted some mission of special importance to women. His bride St. Catherine walked to Avignon and brought back His Popes from their Babylonian captivity. St. Brigid of Ireland shared with St. Patrick the glory of making the isle Catholic. The revelation of Lourdes was made to a little girl kneeling in prayer. St. Joan of Arc, St. Theresa, St. Scholastica, the great women founders of religious orders, seem specially commissioned by Him for great, noble purposes.

Certainly no hero in all the world has won such loyalty and faithful service as women have given to Christ. In His name and for His love they have served the poor, taught little children, nursed the sick, made their houses like the Holy House of Nazareth, taken penitents in their protecting arms, kept devotion to Him flaming high in convents and in private homes. Modern history is lighted

by the glowing lives of women kindled with a spark of the love of Christ.

The Revelation of Love

Then, when the greatest revelation of modern times, the revelation of the love of the Sacred Heart, was to be made to the world, we can hardly fail to see a significance in the fact that though one of His priests, Claude de la Colombiere, was commissioned to preach the devotion, the actual revelation, with its vision of the thorn-circled, flaming heart which has become the very symbol of Christ's love for mankind, was made, not to a man, but to a woman, St. Margaret Mary, kneeling in her Visitation convent. Once more a work of love and a special mark of love was given by Christ to a woman.

He Is Unchanged

The heart of woman can be as lonely now as it was when Christ first looked over the desolate ancient world. Her heart still needs strength with security, understanding without presumption, gentleness that is unselfish.

If, then, the women of the present age looked back twenty centuries and saw how the women of one small nation during a few years had the blessed privilege of knowing this perfect Man and feeling His sympathy, if they thought that His kindliness was restricted after that to a few unusual souls blooming in occasional convents or pious villages, they would be justified in feeling a quite natural twinge of discontent. Surely

women need Him today as much as ever they did. Surely their hearts cry out for all that He can mean to women as truly as did women's hearts in Jerusalem or Siena or Assisi or Paray le Monial. Because this is true, Christ, the perfect man, still offers womankind a friendship, loving yet trustworthy, gentle yet strong, sympathetic yet infinitely holy.

Christ, ever present in the Blessed Sacrament, looks down with infinite understanding upon the world of women and every day in the year fills the loneliness of women's hearts. The Madonnas of the world bring Him their little ones and He blesses them and their children approvingly. The Magdalens deep in despair kneel before Him; He touches their souls with gentle, healing tenderness, and lifts them from sin to sanctity, from darkness to light. The widow raises her eyes to plead for her son long dead in sin, and Christ touches the boy and gives him back to his mother. The little bride, fearing that the joy of her marriage feast is fast slipping into hopeless ruin, flies to Him, and He calms her fears and gives her once more the joy of her wedding day. The modern Mary and Martha offer Him, exiled in a world that denies the very fact of the Eucharist, the hospitality of their warm, loving hearts, and He comes to dwell with them in Holy Communion as once He dwelt in the little house of Bethany.

No wonder, then, that our Catholic churches are always filled by the girls and women who day and night flock to Christ in

the tabernacle. Girls slip away from their offices, and wives from their homes, and mothers from their nurseries, and teachers from their classrooms, to find the sympathy and understanding offered to their hearts by this perfect Man. For Christ in the tabernacle, as Christ walking the earth, knows best a woman's joys and sorrows. He is the only one who really understands.

The Heart of His Mother

Christ understands. He read, we must remember, the story of all womankind in the life of His own mother. She was the perfect woman, and to her came whatever a woman can experience except original and personal sin. Had He known her alone, He would still have known womankind. Because from the moment of conception Christ was in full possession of consciousness, because He combined the vision of God with the acquired experience of a man, He read the heart of His mother with perfect clearness. In her story was, we may almost say, the story of womankind.

Mary, on the threshold of womanhood, faced marriage hesitantly. The love of virginity was uppermost in her soul, and she prized that above all else. Yet in the mystery of the Incarnation the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity smiled approvingly and gave her the joy of motherhood with the preservation of her cherished virginity. He was present at the almost overwhelming joy that flooded her soul when her fears, holy and maidenly, were swept aside and she

knew that she carried in her womb the Child who was her son and the Son of God. Christ alone of all mankind shared with a mother the secret, unspoken happiness of the months of waiting. He alone knew the eagerness, the dreads, the beautiful dreams with which mothers wrap round their unborn sons.

He experienced her anguish of soul when because of Him she bent silently before the questioning, hurt eyes of Joseph. In the thrilling moment when she held her first-born in her arms, He alone of all the sons of women had a conscious part. For the rest of mankind the beautiful joys and consuming worries that surround the first years of childhood are a secret they never share. Jesus knew them, experienced them with His mother, felt their poignant reactions on her heart.

The poverty that forced her to use her veil for His baby clothes and a manger for His crib, that made her house a place of small economies and hard labor which roughened her hands and the hands of her growing boy, was His deliberate choice. By her side He stood when Joseph died and the shadow of that death was flung over the little home. His heart was torn as hers was with the breaking of those ties that fastened Him to the house in Nazareth, for He foresaw more clearly than she possibly could the loneliness of the evenings when, after He had begun His public life, she must sit alone at the evening meal, face His empty chair, and know that He would never sit in it again. When she stood at His torturing deathbed,

He bore her sorrow added to His own pain; and in the midst of physical torture and mental agony He remembered her and cared for her. His own rejection by His people was hard; far harder was the anguish He knew she felt when she realized that the world regarded her boy as a cheat and a failure.

No phase of woman's life, then, was hidden from this Son, who learned all women's joy and sorrow in the person of the one woman whose life was an epitome of every happiness and grief that women, since the world began, have ever experienced.

He Is Lonely Too

And if the heart of woman is so often lonely, surely the heart of Christ knew unspeakable loneliness too. He walked the earth and no one except a woman, His mother, seemed to understand Him. His disciples never caught His plans, never dreamed His dreams, for up to the very moment of Pentecost, while He dreamed of a spiritual kingdom, they talked of thrones and armies and the restored kingdom of Israel. Surely nothing makes one so utterly lonely as the feeling that no one understands the things nearest to one's heart. Christ walked alone, talking of His hopes to people who laughed at them or misinterpreted them or turned them into new reasons for His death. When He promised them the thing that was to prove His continued love for the world, the Blessed Sacrament, many used it as a pretext for leaving Him forever. And He followed their departure with hurt, disappointed eyes.

The cry "Behold the heart that has loved men so much and has been loved so little in return," that comes forth from the tabernacle, sounds very much like a cry of loneliness from the Eucharistic Christ. With love squandered on everything and so little of it for Him, with throngs pouring down the city streets and lone worshipers before the altar, with the theaters crowded and the churches so often empty, it would be strange if the Christ upon our altars did not know loneliness. Surely we sympathize most easily with the thing we ourselves know.

Women are lonely? So was Christ. So, in a sense, is Christ. If lonely souls, when they find each other, cling together, surely women will cling to Christ. If the surest cure for loneliness is unselfishness to others, women have the cure for their own loneliness in devotion to the lonely Christ.

The Perfect Man

So, into the ancient world that had treated women so badly walked the lovely figure of the God-Man. He did not come as Adam came, in the full vigor of maturity, but as a baby born of a woman, the guise that must make the strongest appeal to a woman's tenderness. From the crib He stretches out His baby arms asking for affection and care. Can any woman be lonely when she takes a baby to her breast?

Then, as an attractive boy, He spent those early years in intimate association with a woman, sharing the burdens of her household, helping her as a devoted son helps the

mother he loves. With Joseph dead, the task of providing for her became His own. His labor in the carpenter shop was what earned the food for her table, the linen for her bed, the clothes she wore.

Grown to full maturity, He walked the highways of His mission while this mother, first with pride, then with a sense of His doom, knew His greatness and His divinity. She had experienced herself the gentleness and strength of His soul, that made women follow Him devotedly, open the doors of their homes to welcome Him, stay near Him on the cross and before His tomb, faithful when all others had fled. He, who had cared for her need, sought out the needy women of the towns. Because He was so pure, she saw sinful women for the first time in their sad history looking into the eyes of a man strong yet pitying, sinless yet infinitely forgiving.

There were lonely women's hearts before Christ came. There need be no loneliness in the world's most forgotten woman if she looks upon Jesus, loves Him, and asks for His sympathy and understanding.

The beautiful companionship which Jesus gave to His mother, to Martha and Mary, to the women saints of the Church, the understanding forgiveness that He showed to Magdalen and to the sinful women who turned to Him, the strength for their weakness and sympathy for their sorrows, the gentleness for their need that He gave to the women of that ancient world and to every woman

who seeks Him in the Blessed Sacrament, He holds out to the women of today.

In Jesus Christ they find the ideal of their dreaming, the realization of their hopes, the man who fulfills their highest desires, the only one who never disappoints.

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